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ABSTRACT

This manual provides an overview of the concepts and issues involved in the assessment of prior learning in the context of the increasing numbers of older, nontraditional students returning to higher education. Section 1 gives background information about prior learning assessment (PLA) and defines PLA as assessment by some valid and reliable means, by a qualified specialist, of what has been learned through non-formal education/training or experience, that is worthy of credit in a course or program offered by the institution providing the credit. Section 2 describes the standards and guidelines for quality assurance of PLA. Various methods of prior learning assessment are featured in Section 3. In Section 4, the focus is on one of the most common methods of PLA--portfolio assessment. It introduces a discussion of academic and administrative issues and includes a discussion of special issues that pertain to the assessment of portfolios. Section 5 is intended for individuals or institutions who already use prior learning assessment or who will be implementing a PLA process. Section 6 lists the recommended participants in the PLA process. Appendixes list characteristics of adult learners and a sample prior learning assessment policy at one British Columbia institution. Also included are a glossary and a bibliography. (Contains 33 references.) (JB)

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Prior Learning Assessment in British Columbia

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An Orientation for Postsecondary Institutions

A joint project of Douglas College, Malaspina University-College, Open Learning Agenc and University College of the Fraser Valley

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Prior Learning Assessment

in British Columbia

An Orientation for Postsecondary Institutions

Acknowledgments

A joint project of Douglas College, Malaspina University-College, the Open Learning Agency, and University College of the Fraser Valley.

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We wish to thank the British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfer for their leadership and for their support of prior learning assessment in the province. The contents of this handbook reflect the procedures recommended by the BC Council on Admissions and Transfer for the good practice of PLA in BC.

Additional copies of this handbook are available from the Marketing Department, Open Learning Agency.

Institutions and professionals are free to copy this handbook for educational use providing appropriate citation is given.

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Foreword

The British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfer seeks to facilitate access and success by students pursuing educational and career goals. Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) has potential for contributing to these goals.

Individuals in our present work force must become the skilled people we need to fill a multitude of new and emerging roles—in human services, health care, business, tourism and recreation, skilled trades, and technology. Many of these people have a wealth of previous learning that has been acquired through a variety of experiences, study, and environments. Because they often face pressures of time and resources, they may only be able to become students in our institutions if they are given credit for what they already know. Our scarce resources must be used to help students progress from where they currently are, not to repeat what they already know.

In reading this manual and other information about PLA, you will become aware of the rigor and thoroughness of the PLA process. The Council recommends that institutions not undertake PLA until faculty and staff are trained. The Council's Standing Committee on PLA is co-operating with BC institutions to ensure that appropriate training is available. This manual is not intended as a replacement for training but will serve as an introduction and reference. A companion piece, an orientation guide for learners, is also available. It is entitled *Prior Learning Assessment in British Columbia: A Guide to Earning Credit for Your Skills and Knowledge.*

The Council is encouraging development of portfolio assessment as the most flexible and adaptable means of PLA but also supports the other processes described in these manuals. Some have suggested that the credits awarded through PLA are based upon a more comprehensive evaluation and a more thorough understanding of the student's learning than is often possible in more conventional instructional situations. For this reason, some students who choose PLA as their means of access to further education or to a required credential may perform at an equivalent or higher level than those who have followed the conventional training routes. Careful follow-up and research will be necessary to test this hypothesis.

As resources permit, the Council intends to facilitate co-operation and sharing of resources and experience among institutions to ensure that PLA development and research occur effectively in our province.

Your participation in these initiatives is welcomed.

British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfer
July 1994

LLOYD MORIN

Introduction

In the 1990s, a walk across the campus of any British Columbia postsecondary institution is an eye-opening experience. The student population has changed.

Instead of a homogeneous cluster of 18- to 24-year-olds crossing the grounds and occupying classrooms, libraries, and offices of campuses, a more diverse group of learners prevails. Faculty, looking around their classrooms, note that class composition is more evenly balanced between recent high school graduates and learners who are mature, many of whom are "returning to learning" after an extended absence. Administrators, reviewing institutional statistics, report a shift away from full-time to part-time registration. Prospective learners, bringing more complex employment and personal experience, seek flexible educational programs to better match their learning needs.

In comparison to the typical students of the 1970s and 1980s, the students of the 1990s are more likely to be wearing several hats. Not only do they wear the hat of the learner, many also wear the hat of the parent, the employee, and the volunteer. These returning students generally are entering postsecondary institutions with a more comprehensive set of experiences and a wealth of learning for which they wish to receive credit. They seek to build upon their prior learning base as they attempt to acquire additional knowledge and skills.

What does this mean for those in postsecondary education who teach, administer programs, and provide student support services?

These changing student demographics have implications for the policies and practices of institutions of higher learning. One practice that offers a way to accommodate the learning needs of these lifelong learners is prior learning assessment. By providing a means for learners to identify their prior learning and to have it assessed for its equivalence to postsecondary-level education, institutions formally recognize the contributions that adults bring to the educational environment; they also validate and support the notion of "lifelong learning."

This manual, *Prior Learning Assessment in British Columbia: An Orientation for Postsecondary Institutions*, provides an overview of the concepts and issues involved in the assessment of prior learning. Section 1 gives background information about prior learning assessment (PLA). Section 2 describes the standards and guidelines for quality assurance of PLA. Various methods of prior learning assessment are featured in Section 3. In Section 4, the focus is on one of the most common methods of PLA—portfolio assessment. Individuals or institutions who already use prior learning assessment or who will be implementing a PLA process may find Section 5 the most relevant. It introduces a discussion of academic and administrative issues and includes a discussion of special issues that pertain to the assessment of portfolios. Section 6 lists the participants in the PLA process. At the end of the manual, there are appendixes, a glossary, and a bibliography.

Section 1

Prior Learning Assessment in Context

Definition

The British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfer (BCCAT) recently adopted the following definition of prior learning assessment (PLA):

> **PLA is assessment by some valid and reliable means, by a qualified specialist, of what has been learned through nonformal education/training or experience, that is worthy of credit in a course or program offered by the institution providing the credit.**
>
> Source: British Columbia Council of Admissions and Transfer, *Prior Learning Assessment, 3d Update,* May 1994

In many ways, assessment of prior learning is already an everyday occurrence in British Columbia postsecondary education. Faculty and others concerned with admissions have available a wide range of assessment tools that are most frequently used to determine a learner's achievement or placement. Exams, essays, assignments, role play exercises, laboratory write-ups, demonstrations, and samples of artwork are common methods of measuring achievement. Diagnostic testing, offered by some institutions in some subject areas, also assists in placing learners in the appropriate level of a course or program which helps students avoid having to duplicate their learning.

However, the term *prior learning assessment* has a more specific interpretation. PLA, in its current usage, refers to the assessment of knowledge, skills, and attitudes acquired through life experiences, work, and study not previously associated with conventional institutional credit. PLA measures and evaluates what has been learned regardless of the source of the learning. Whether for achievement or for placement, what is truly being measured is what the student has already learned. Therefore it could be argued that since all learning has occurred previously, any such measurement is prior learning assessment.

To earn credit through PLA toward a course or program offered by a postsecondary institution, the learner must demonstrate, by some valid means, that the learning is equivalent to that which normally would be acquired through conventional study at the postsecondary level.

There are many valid and reliable means for qualified specialists to determine whether the learner should be awarded credit for a course or program. Colleges and universities with a history of prior learning assessment favor two major methods: examinations and portfolios. Other options are possible and Section 3 provides a more thorough discussion of all of these methods.

Types of Requests for PLA

If the situation in British Columbia develops similarly to that of other jurisdictions, requests for PLA will most likely come from employed persons with extensive work and practical experience who are making mid-life career transitions. These requests will be for credits toward career/technical programs, vocational/trades programs, degree programs, and professional qualifications.

Career/Technical Programs

Most requests will probably come in the career and technical areas, especially in business, fine and performing arts, computers, and human services. Some of these requests will come from individuals wanting to receive practicum credit for significant, related work experience.

> **Danielle** is a manager in a food processing plant. She has a two-year diploma in food science technology and five years of experience supervising employees in the food testing laboratory. On the basis of her supervisory experience, Danielle would like to receive credit for a business management course. She will not be awarded credit for her experience. However, her request for credit might be favorably considered if she identifies and demonstrates the appropriate postsecondary-level knowledge, skills, and attitudes that she has learned from her workplace experiences.

Vocational/Trades Programs

In the vocational and trades areas, requests for PLA may come from individuals who have been trained abroad and lack college-level transfer credit but whose successful work history documents college-level learning as evidenced by their successful work history. As well, there are likely to be requests from people with a multitude of varied skills who are working in specific occupational trades (such as construction or health). Despite having the skills and holding down the jobs, they may lack the formal postsecondary certification required to advance in their jobs or to change jobs.

Degree Programs

In associate and undergraduate degree programs, liberal arts and applied sciences disciplines may encounter more PLA requests than other subject areas. Surprisingly, there may be more requests for upper-level course credit than for introductory course credit. This can be explained by the more specific (and sometimes more applied) nature of upper-level courses in comparison to the more general nature of lower level survey courses.

Professional Qualifications

Individuals who have professional licensure but little or no formally recognized postsecondary education may be submitting requests for PLA. Practising nurses are a good example of this. They may have received their education and training at hospital-based nursing schools rather than by taking college courses, yet their learning is equivalent to what is offered at the postsecondary level.

> **Juanita** is a psychiatric nurse who trained at Riverview Hospital 16 years ago at a time when college courses were not required for program completion. She has continued to work with the mentally ill while raising her three children. She is currently head nurse of a unit at Riverview. She has also worked as a research assistant on several projects there. When it was announced that Riverview will be phased out, Juanita realized that she must obtain a degree if she is to stay in nursing administration. Although she has no college credits, she thinks that she should be able to get some credit in psychology (based on her original hospital training) as well as credit for an upper-level course in abnormal psychology.

Provincial and International PLA Activities

In many ways, postsecondary institutions have used forms of prior learning assessment for years. Transfer of credits, challenge exams, exemptions from prerequisites, etc., are all forms of PLA. Two countries are notable in leading the development of PLA: the United States and the United Kingdom. The history of PLA in these countries is proving very valuable in providing guidelines for the development of Canadian PLA programs.

United States

Several PLA opportunities are available at colleges and universities in the United States. The two major approaches to PLA, by examination and by portfolio, form the foundation of PLA activity in the United States. Over ninety percent of the private and public postsecondary institutions recognize PLA by examination. At least half the institutions make PLA by portfolio available to students.

The development of PLA in the United States has its roots in the extensive use of college admission examinations. The College Entrance Examination Board (CEEB) began to develop tests for aptitude in the 1930s and later for achievement. During the 1950s and 1960s, formalized testing programs were started to assess prior learning. These remain to this day.

In the 1940s the return of World War II veterans created the major thrust in the development of PLA. These veterans sought college admission and requested recognition of their military training, and this marked the first time in the history of the United States when there were large numbers of non-traditional students. To

assist these military personnel, the DANTES (Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Educational Support) exam program was initiated. DANTES has since been expanded to be accessible to non-military persons; it is widely available in the United States.

In the forefront of PLA activity in North America is the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). Initially a project of the Educational Testing Service, CAEL was formed in 1976 to research and promote methods of assisting academic institutions in assessing prior learning. This leadership role has grown, and most PLA programs are based on the ten standards CAEL developed for assessing prior learning. Of particular significance is CAEL's role in establishing standards for quality assurance. CAEL also offers texts, workshops, materials, consultants, and other services that are valued not only in the postsecondary world but in the business world as well. As joint ventures between business and education emerge, CAEL's contributions to PLA are being appreciated by people in the workplace.

CAEL continues to promote the use of standardized exams and equivalencies. However, CAEL also stresses the importance of individualized assessment (PLA by portfolio).

United Kingdom

Prior learning assessment in the United Kingdom is usually referred to as APL (Accreditation of Prior Learning). APL was first introduced in the 1980s as an additional method of determining whether adult learners met college admission requirements. Since then it has grown tremendously.

The UK has decided that vocational qualifications should be based on nationally recognized competence standards. In 1986, the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) and its Scottish counterpart, SCOTVEQ, as well as participating colleges endorsed the use of APL. Training Enterprise Councils (TECs), employing local assessors and trainers, have been established, and APL is integrated into this system. Occupational certifying bodies work with educational institutions to develop criterion-referenced assessment tools. The generally accepted view is that learners should be assessed against course outcomes and should not be awarded credit just because time has been spent in a program.

Canada

Formal PLA activities in Canada can be traced to Ontario and Quebec in the 1980s. Today the pressure to implement PLA is intense in Canada where there are too many students competing for too few funded spaces.

Ontario

In the 1980s in Ontario, the first PLA policies and processes were successfully introduced at Loyalist College, Mohawk College, and the First Nations Technical Institute. Ontario now offers learners extensive PLA opportunities. With a mandate from the Ontario Council of Regents, a Prior Learning Assessment Advisory and Co-ordinating Group was created to oversee the co-ordination of community college PLA programs. There is also a secretariat that is responsible for staff development, training, and program co-ordination. All colleges must make a proportion of their curriculum open to PLA. Ontario universities have yet to implement formal policies for PLA.

Quebec

At the recommendation of the Jean Commission on Education, Quebec has implemented a PLA system at all levels of education. This system is currently being used in secondary and CEGEP levels but is not particularly well recognized in the universities. An outcome of the provincial and institutional mandate for PLA has been that the CEGEP curriculum has become more competence based.

British Columbia

Interest in prior learning assessment is growing rapidly in British Columbia. Two provincial conferences on PLA have been held under the leadership of the BCCAT. BCCAT has also co-ordinated the development of a statement of Standards and Implementation Guidelines based on CAEL standards. As postsecondary institutions plan and develop their own policies for PLA, these can serve as principles for establishing quality, credible PLA programs in British Columbia.

PLA projects are currently underway at Douglas College, Malaspina University-College, Open Learning Agency, University College of the Fraser Valley, and the University of Victoria.

Other Provinces

In other provinces, there are, as yet, no formal PLA policies at the provincial level although there is considerable interest within the provinces and within specific institutions in implementing a system of PLA. Newfoundland, New Brunswick, and Manitoba, for example, currently support PLA pilot projects. Alberta has been developing a White Paper on PLA and has been discussing implementing systems of PLA.

Benefits of PLA

It is not only learners who benefit from prior learning assessment. There are additional benefits from the PLA process for others involved—for institutions, faculty, the workplace, and other PLA providers.

PLA is of benefit to:

Learners
Institutions
Faculty
Workplace

Benefits for Learners

Increased access: Learners will be able to shorten the time necessary to gain a new credential by applying what they already know and can do.

Career development: In a society where job promotion is often related to a suitable credential, PLA can reduce the time and expense needed to acquire a credential and thereby increase employment opportunities.

Comprehensive appraisal of knowledge and skills: PLA can help identify areas of competence and areas needing further study; this is especially important in course selection.

Foundation for career and educational planning: By discovering what they do (and do not) know, learners are better prepared to make realistic life plans.

Positive self-esteem: Validation of nonformal learning confirms the worth of the individual and contributes to a greater valuing of self.

Greater comfort with transition to postsecondary education: With acknowledgment of prior learning, the institution is seen as welcoming rather than as daunting.

Benefits for Institutions

More appropriate student placement in courses: Students who have already achieved mastery in a course will not need to repeat it and unnecessarily fill a seat that can be more advantageously filled by someone needing that particular learning.

Student recruitment and retention: New groups of learners may be attracted and students with PLA credit may be more motivated to complete their programs.

Meeting the needs of a wider range of learners: PLA offers expanded alternatives to satisfy the needs of a more diverse student population.

Enhanced institutional image within the community: Postsecondary institutions will be seen as flexible and responsive to changing times and as having an ongoing interest in learning.

Benefits for Faculty

Professional acknowledgment: Faculty who are involved in PLA will be recognized as experts in their fields.

Greater expertise with a variety of assessment tools: Faculty develop familiarity and skill with many assessment methods which they may wish to use in other instructional settings.

Update on practical applications of the subject area: Because the credit requests will primarily reflect current practices, faculty have the opportunity to see how theory is manifested in the workplace.

New insights into ways adults learn: New insights can stimulate new ways of enriching classroom teaching.

Benefits for the Workplace

Recognition that the workplace offers valuable learning and training: Employers who offer extensive learning activities for their employees receive acknowledgment of the value of workplace-based training.

Minimized employee time away from job: Credit for prior learning eliminates the waste of time involved in repeating learning.

Reduced financial costs of employer-sponsored education: By eliminating duplicate learning, employers save on educational expenses for employees.

Opportunities to facilitate employee career development: PLA offers an incentive to employees to pursue further learning.

Section 2

Quality Assurance in Prior Learning Assessment

To be credible and ensure quality, any PLA process must be based on a philosophy that respects all participants and that sets rigorous but fair and consistent standards.

PLA Standards for British Columbia

The most frequent reservation heard about prior learning assessment concerns quality. When first introduced to PLA, administrators, faculty, and other interested parties reasonably and rightly ask about program quality. Typical questions include:

> "What standards are in place to ensure that prior learning assessment is not a credit giveaway?"
>
> "How does this program maintain its credibility?"
>
> "What are the principles that underlie the PLA process?"
>
> "What policies and procedures do institutions incorporate in their PLA process to support a quality program?"

In response, experienced PLA administrators and assessors refer to the widely accepted PLA standards developed by Urban Whittaker for CAEL. These Ten Standards for Quality Assurance form the philosophical foundation for many PLA programs in the United States and in Canada, including in British Columbia.

Using the CAEL standards to stimulate discussion with postsecondary institutions, BCCAT approved a statement of PLA standards. The following eleven education and administrative standards resulted from the PLA discussions in British Columbia in 1993–1994. They lay the groundwork for credible, quality PLA programs in British Columbia.

Postsecondary institutions and programs are encouraged to adopt these standards as they develop their own PLA programs and policies.

BCCAT Standards for PLA

Education Standards

1. Credit should be awarded only for demonstrated learning and not for experience.
2. Credit should be awarded only for learning which is relevant to the content and learning outcomes of the course or program to which the credit is being applied.
3. Credit should be awarded for learning which is consistent with the achievement levels required by the postsecondary credential to be awarded.
4. Credit should be awarded for learning which has both the theory and practical applications which are appropriate to the subject, course or program.
5. The assessment of prior learning and the determination of credit awards should be made by content specialists, with external advice as necessary.

Administrative Standards

6. Credits awarded as a result of PLA should be identified as such on the transcript issued by the institution.
7. Credit awards and the transcript entries should be monitored to avoid giving PLA credits and other credits for the same learning.
8. Policies and procedures applied to assessment, including provision for appeal, should be fully disclosed.
9. Fees charged for assessment should be based on the services performed in the process and not determined by the amount of credit awarded.
10. All personnel involved in the assessment of learning should receive training for the functions they perform, and there should be provision for their continued professional development in areas related to PLA.
11. PLA policies and practices should be regularly monitored, reviewed, evaluated, and revised as needed.

Source: British Columbia Council of Admissions and Transfer.
Prior Learning Assessment, 3d Update, May 1994

PLA Implementation Guidelines for British Columbia

As a further measure of quality assurance, BCCAT developed a set of implementation guidelines for postsecondary institutions. These guidelines provide a framework for PLA activities as they relate to seven areas: PLA context, PLA access, PLA assessment process, client orientation/preparation, training of PLA personnel, fee assessment, and transcripts/transfer arrangements.

PLA Context

1. PLA should occur within the broader context of education, career, or life planning.
2. Institutions should provide adequate support services for those learners accessing PLA.
3. PLA courses and assessment services should be offered only in the language of instruction of the institution granting the credit. Supplementary language instruction may occur prior to, or concurrently with, the PLA portfolio development.
4. The ongoing development and monitoring of PLA services should involve external representatives from groups such as business, industry, licensing and accrediting bodies, and professional associations.

PLA Access

1. PLA should be considered as a vehicle for enhancing access to education/training. Where possible, orientation or portfolio development courses should be offered at employment sites.
2. PLA should be developed first for those programs where the labor market demand or learner need has been identified, and institutional readiness and capacity are evident.
3. Ultimately, as PLA credibility is established and adequate assessment procedures and supporting resources are in place, the goal should be to provide PLA access to the most comprehensive range of programs to accommodate the broad range of prior learning.

PLA Assessment

1. Learning assessed for postsecondary credit should be:
   - Defined in terms of what was learned and what the person can do as a result, rather than the amount of time spent;
   - Transferable to contexts other than the one in which it was learned;
   - Current;
   - At a level of achievement equivalent to that of other students engaged in studies at that level in that program or subject area.

2. The number of credits to be granted is determined by the institution, following assessment of the learning by content specialists.
3. The names and qualifications of those making an assessment should be recorded.

Client Orientation/Preparation

1. Persons seeking credit through PLA should start with an adequate orientation to the process. This may occur in two phases—a short orientation seminar, followed, for some, by a more comprehensive course in education and career planning of which PLA is a major component.

Training of PLA Personnel

1. All personnel involved in PLA (PLA assessors, student advisors, instructors of portfolio development/career/educational planning courses) should have appropriate skills and knowledge acquired through either the completion of courses which fulfill system specifications, or demonstration of equivalent learning from other sources.

Fee Assessment

1. Costs of conducting PLA should be assessed in ways that are equitable to the students as consumers and to the specialist assessors and the institution as providers.
2. Fees for assessment should be set in terms of the learning to be assessed, and the amount of credit requested. Fees should not be set in terms of the number of credits awarded.
3. Fees for a portfolio development course or seminar should be set within the institution's policy for course fees.

Transcripts/Transfer

1. Transcripts should identify credits awarded through PLA. Grades should be assigned to credits awarded through PLA consistent with the grading policy applied to conventional courses in that area.
2. The transferability of credit for PLA courses should be determined within the context of the articulation process and institutional admissions policies. Prejudicial judgment and decision against credit awarded by PLA should be discouraged.
3. The assessment of transcripts and credentials from offshore institutions is not considered part of the current PLA program, but an individual preparing a portfolio may include these as evidence of learning which is believed to be relevant to the program for which credit is being requested.
4. The percentage of a program's credits which can be obtained through PLA should be determined by the institution awarding the credential.

Source: British Columbia Council of Admissions and Transfer, *Prior Learning Assessment, 3d Update*, May 1994

Section 3

Methods of Assessing Prior Learning

Range of Methods

Institutions that are able to offer PLA can choose from a range of assessment methods, none of which are particularly different from those used in course evaluation. The exception is that there is no classroom participation to evaluate.

The various methods can be clustered into three main categories:

- Exams
- Equivalencies
- Documentation and demonstration of achievement

Methods of Assessment

Exams

- Challenge
- Standardized

Equivalencies

- Program
- Course

Documentation and demonstration of achievement

- Portfolio
- Portfolio-assisted assessment
  - Products
  - Performance
  - Simulation
  - Interviews and oral exams
  - Skills demonstration

Assessing Prior Learning through Examination

Sometimes individuals acquire significant learning from the nonformal system that is best demonstrated through an exam process. There are basically two options for exams: challenge exams and standardized exams.

Challenge exams are probably the most familiar type of prior learning assessment currently being used in postsecondary institutions. A challenge exam is not a course final but is usually prepared especially for the learner by the instructor of the course being challenged. A challenge exam should not be text based or require that a learner have been exposed to a particular instructor at a particular time. The exam should cover a wide body of accepted knowledge or concepts in the challenged course. The PLA candidate should be able to pass a challenge exam after having been exposed to the field in a variety of ways. Challenge exams require that there be agreement between instructors as to what constitutes the accepted body of knowledge, skills, and values that are being examined.

Standardized exams are recognized by most colleges and universities in the United States but have not received such widespread acceptance in Canada. Learners who have earned credit from PLA by standardized exams generally find few problems with receiving transfer credit at American institutions. These batteries of standardized exams offer over 150 separate titles in the arts and sciences, business, nursing, computer science, education, technology, and occupational areas. Introductory and highly theoretical courses lend themselves well to standardized examination, especially where the body of knowledge being tested is not specifically Canadian but is universal in theme (e.g., mathematics or English composition). A detailed listing of postsecondary-level standardized tests is included in the Glossary under Standarized tests.

Assessing Prior Learning through Equivalencies

Not all learning is best measured by exams. Sometimes learners possess significant training in their field that they have gained from employer-related training activities, continuing education courses, military-related training, and other formal activities that are outside of the postsecondary system but that clearly represent postsecondary-level learning. In this case, it may be more appropriate to set up equivalencies for credit. This manual discusses the two types of equivalencies—program equivalencies and course equivalencies.

Program equivalencies are better known in the context of "block credit." When a learner requests that a successfully completed program, professional licence, or professional certificate be evaluated for credit toward a credential, the learner is asking for block credit or advanced credit. Strictly speaking, program equivalencies do not measure the individual's learning. Rather, it is the instruction that was delivered that is being evaluated. In that sense, it is similar to the traditional articulation process. What differs is that the program or licence or certificate being evaluated for program equivalency credit is often from a nonformal source.

In the United States, the Program on Non-Collegiate Sponsored Instruction (PONSI), sponsored by the American Council on Education (ACE), has done

evaluations of several hundred corporate training programs as well as a number of union and governmental programs.

Increasingly, there may be demands on the educational system from both privately and publicly supported institutions for assessment of programs offered outside of postsecondary institutions. To ensure that these programs meet the quality requirements for PLA, the program should have an evaluation component built into it, and the same PLA standards should be applied.

Course equivalencies are also better known in a different context, as "transfer credit." Transfer credit pertains to courses for which articulation between accredited postsecondary institutions is arranged. As with program equivalencies, what is being evaluated is not the student's actual learning in a course but the instruction that was delivered. When a learner initiates a request for a course equivalency, the request could be for formal studies or for nonformal learning. Especially in the case of nonformal learning, the PLA candidate bears the primary responsibility for providing details of the course content and evidence of his or her achievements in that course.

Assessing Prior Learning through Documentation and Demonstration of Achievement

In many cases neither exams nor equivalencies give learners the best opportunity to prove that they know what they claim to know. In these situations, a written portfolio provides a better method for demonstrating and documenting learning. When a portfolio is supplemented with samples of achievement, this combination is known as portfolio-assisted assessment. Guidance in preparing a portfolio is usually available in the form of a course commonly referred to as a "portfolio development course."

Portfolios are receiving the most initial attention in British Columbia. In this approach to assessment, the learner prepares a biographical narrative, a statement of educational goals, a request for credit, a description of learning, and documentation (evidence) of learning. Reports from other PLA programs indicate that the section on the description of learning usually proves to be both the most challenging and most rewarding aspect of the portfolio. In this section, the learner must state the learning in terms of course objectives. Often it is during the development of a portfolio that the individual first begins to elucidate just what it is that has been learned. The portfolio requires the learner not only to verify for others what has been learned. In the portfolio, the learner must also address the question, "How do I know what I learned during the experience, and how do I write about the experience to convince others of what I learned?"

Portfolio-assisted assessment provides a very comprehensive assessment. With this method of assessment, either the learner or the assessor may decide that additional indicators of achievement to support the portfolio will be beneficial. Products, performances, simulations, interviews and oral exams, and skills demonstrations are the main ways that are used to supplement the portfolio.

Because of the interest in this form of assessment, Section 4 provides a more detailed account of the portfolio and portfolio-assisted assessment methods.

Choosing a Method

There is no one PLA method that is universally best for any or all situations. Methods should be selected to suit the unique needs of the particular situation. A combination of methods may be used. The choice of methods has to be based on the assessment process, on the nature of the course, and on the availability of the learner's evidence. Certainly all of the assessment methods have their advantages and all have their disadvantages. The table immediately following lists the assessment methods, summarizes the advantages and difficulties of each, and offers suggestions for their use.

Factors to Consider

In selecting one assessment method or a combination of methods, there are many factors that must be taken into consideration. Faculty will want to be involved in these decisions.

1. The method of evaluation should have a qualitative, quantitative, or combination assessment.
2. The method should be able to evaluate postsecondary-level learning.
3. The method should go beyond being a description of learning to making a judgment as to the level and extent of learning.
4. Because the various assessment methods vary greatly in terms of the valid, reliable, and practical strengths of the instruments used, the method that is selected should be acceptable to both the assessor and to the learner. There must also be accountability within the process (i.e., expert faculty, full disclosure to learners, involvement of learners, provision of appeal process).

Given these considerations, it becomes evident that the normal practice will be to use more than one method.

Orientation for PLA Candidates

For many learners, the concept of prior learning assessment is unfamiliar. It can also be confusing. To assist prospective candidates to understand the different options for PLA, postsecondary educators are encouraged to host regular PLA orientation sessions. These information sessions would introduce PLA and summarize the options available. Such sessions could be particularly valuable to learners who have previously had difficulties or unsatisfactory results within conventional educational settings.

Methods of Assessing Prior Learning

Assessment Method	Advantages	Difficulties	Suggestions for Use
EXAMS **Challenge Exams**	• Relatively quick. • Encourage cross-faculty collaboration in assessment and discussion of course content (what should be taught/learned). • Inexpensive to administer and assess. • Require minimal preparation by faculty once exams are developed. • Assess knowledge of content.	• May be text-specific and depend on learner being familiar with specific jargon. • Assess learner ability to take tests as much as they assess subject knowledge. • Slanted to specific department/institutional point of view and subject biases. • Little support to learners who have trouble with tests. • Little support to learners whose learning is not compartmentalized. • Intimidating for many learners. • Puts those who did not sit in the classroom at a disadvantage. • May be a weak indicator of a learner's true knowledge of the subject area. • Challenge exams are *not* course exams. • Initial development costs are high.	• Useful in a limited format. • Should be developed as generically as possible—test only the most commonly accepted and taught material in the field. • Should be used only when appropriate. • Should avoid being idiosyncratic to institution, instructor, or department. • Good option for some learners and courses. • Require a process for monitoring validity and reliability of exams.

Assessment Method	Advantages	Difficulties	Suggestions for Use
Standardized Exams (i.e., ACT, CLEP, others developed locally)	• Generic. • Cross-culturally normed. • Reliability/validity established. • Easy to access and administer for faculty and learners. • Cost effective.	• Little support to learners who have trouble with objective tests. • Little support to learners whose learning is not compartmentalized. • Intimidating for many learners. • Limited subject area availability. • Limited acceptance in British Columbia.	• Good option to make available for learners. • Good transferability possibilities. • Should be used only when appropriate. • Method requires extensive work toward acceptance within BC.
EQUIVALENCIES Program Evaluations (primarily block evaluation of non-postsecondary programs, certificates, designations)	• Provide assessment for many individuals with a minimum of evaluation. • Respect business/industry culture and employee learning. • Can lead to long-term business/education partnerships. • Are cost effective. • Provide faculty assessment experience. • Provide faculty opportunity to see state of the art in training and subject matter. • Respect prior, often rigorous, learning.	• Complex methodology. • Require significant up-front preparation of faculty for evaluation. • Difficult for institutions to do without training or other background experience with PLA. • Focus more on input than individual outcomes. • Wide range makes understanding of all elements difficult.	• Visit other institutions who have this kind of program in place to get information. • Require comparison of non-postsecondary programs to postsecondary programs including their method of assessment/evaluation. • The business/industry program will have had to include an evaluation of the learner.

(cont.)

Assessment Method	Advantages	Difficulties	Suggestions for Use
(cont.) **EQUIVALENCIES** **Program Evaluations** (primarily block evaluation of non-postsecondary programs, certificates, designations)			• Need more time to become operational than other methods. • Need to use specific faculty experts who are familiar with the field. • Keep in mind that this program evaluates the program rather than the learner.
DOCUMENTATION & DEMONSTRATION OF ACHIEVEMENT **Portfolio Assessments**	• Extremely learner centred. • Enable the development of attributes, skills, and understanding beyond simple assessment. • Prepare and socialize learners to higher-education conventions.	• Expensive process for the institution. • Dependent upon writing skills of learner—biased toward writing-articulate learners. • Complex methodology. • May require learners to take a portfolio development course. • May set up unrealistic expectations in learner's mind about number of credits to be awarded. • Lengthy process for learner.	• Institutions must identify expectations for portfolio submission. • Useful when learner has access to documentation materials.

Assessment Method	Advantages	Difficulties	Suggestions for Use
Portfolio-Assisted Assessment Product Assessment (Work sample)	• Very direct. • Good opportunity for learners with writing difficulties. • Useful when learner skills and knowledge are difficult to observe in the creation of a product. • Necessary to the assessment of learning in the arts.	• Difficult to authenticate. • Risk of plagiarism. • Doesn't demonstrate knowledge of theory. • Difficult to administer and evaluate in an unbiased, objective manner. • Evaluates only the end product; doesn't show the process.	• Clear standards and criteria for assessment, evaluation, and measurement should be established prior to the assessment. • Best done in conjunction with other assessment methods (i.e., interviews). • Verifies authenticity through interviews or letters from employers, etc.
Simulation/ Performance Assessments	• Very practical. • Clearly demonstrate skill levels and problem solving. • Process can be assessed. • "Real world" is replicated as much as possible, but not identically.	• Hard to set up. • Narrow, no guarantee of replicability. • May involve extensive faculty and material costs.	• Develop clear standards about exactly what is to be assessed and what the performance criteria are. • Guard against external influences. • Confidentiality of others involved in the process may need to be protected.

Assessment Method	Advantages	Difficulties	Suggestions for Use
Interviews and Oral Exams	• Personal contact, no plagiarism. • Flexible, helpful for people who have trouble writing. • Commonly used technique. • Quite learner focussed. Important that the learner be aware of the purpose of the interview to allow for preparation. • May be used for a variety of purposes (e.g., counselling) as well as for assessment.	• Expensive. • Potentially stressful. • Risk of cultural bias. • May favor people with good presentation skills but little content. • Require skill to administer and assess in an unbiased, objective manner. • Danger of becoming sidetracked from simple assessment of learning. • Intimidating to learners who are not verbally articulate, have difficulty pronouncing or projecting, or do not think well on their feet.	• Often best used in conjunction with other assessment methods. • Use faculty experts in the field. • Requires co-operation, flexibility, and tolerance on the part of assessor. • Establish and follow guidelines. • Establish questions and ratings in advance. • Conduct the session in private without distractions or interruptions.
Demonstrations	• Quick and observable. • Often can be done in labs with no additional preparation.	• May be affected by the surroundings and learner's familiarity with the equipment.	• Determine what equipment the learner has used in the past and try, if reasonable and possible, to replicate. • May conduct demo at learner's practice site. • Develop clear standards about exactly what is to be assessed and what the performance criteria are.

Adapted from *A Practitioner's Manual for the Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning*, Central Region Prior Learning Assessment Pilot Project Team

Section 4

Portfolios and Portfolio-Assisted Assessment

Portfolios can be used as "stand alone" documents or to "assist" other methods of assessment. Either method offers a means for the individual to document and to demonstrate prior learning.

Portfolios as Process and as Product

The process of developing a portfolio is a learning experience in itself. It can be as valuable for the learner as the finished product, the portfolio. It is also a way for a learner to become more systematic and organized about the recording of learning. What follows here is an ideal model of the portfolio.

> A portfolio is a file or folder of information that has been accumulated about a learner's past experiences and accomplishments.... A portfolio is not only a product, it is a process by which prior learning experience can be translated into educational objectives, documented, and assessed for academic credit.
>
> Source: Knapp, *Assessing Prior Learning*, (A CAEL Handbook)

Steps in the Development of a Portfolio

The process of developing a portfolio usually involves the following steps. (Items that usually appear in a typical portfolio appear in italics.) Variations are common, depending on the requirements of individual institutions.

The Learner:

1. Reflects on significant life events and activities that have been influential (e.g., work experiences, personal experiences, community service, non-credit courses, training, special accomplishments, hobbies, recreational activities, etc.).
2. Summarizes these achievements in a written *autobiographical narrative*.
3. Identifies career and educational goals.
4. Prepares a written *statement of educational goals*.
5. Identifies significant learning experiences.

6. Extracts and clusters learning outcomes from these experiences.
7. Prepares written competency statements.
8. Researches institutional calendars and course outlines for courses and programs with comparable outcomes and competencies.
9. Matches personal learning to a specific course or program.
10. Writes a *description of learning* that summarizes the competencies, explains how they were acquired, and introduces materials that will verify the learning.
11. Completes a formal *request for credit.*
12. Assembles all evidence that confirms the request for credit, including direct evidence (e.g., samples of work done by the learner) and indirect evidence (e.g., letters of reference about the learner).
13. Prepares an orderly means for presenting the *supporting documentation.*
14. Compiles all of the items into the completed portfolio.
15. Presents the portfolio to the appropriate institutional representative.

Learners need to be cautioned that they will need to be selective about what they put in the portfolios. The portfolio should be relatively concise and only contain what is relevant to the request for credit. Assessors do not have the time or energy to review a 25-page autobiographical statement looking for those elements that could enable them to grant credit.

Elements of a Typical Portfolio

Autobiographical Narrative
Statement of Educational Goals
Description of Learning
Request for Credit
Supporting Documentation

Portfolio Development Course

Most institutions that accept portfolios for assessment encourage the learner to enroll in a portfolio development course. The content of the portfolio development course is organized to aid a learner in compiling the portfolio. A concern for a quality assessment process has led institutions to specify standards for portfolio submission. As part of the course, the PLA candidate becomes familiar with these standards.

Course Format

While most portfolio development courses vary in length from one jurisdiction to another, it appears that about 45 hours is an optimum length. This period of time allows candidates the amount of time needed to reflect on their experiences, identify their learning, and collect their supporting documentation. Class size needs to be relatively small as there is substantial one-to-one discussion between learner and course instructor.

Portfolio development courses can be taught by instructors from many different disciplines. The important criterion is that the instructor is committed to PLA and to experiential learning.

Ideally, the portfolio development course should be offered as a credit course. By offering course credit, the institution is clearly indicating the educational merit of the assessment process. As well, if it is a credit course, the outcomes can be graded. More importantly, however, it is a course that offers its own learning. Learners who take the portfolio development course often report that it was the most difficult learning they have ever done. Even where completion of the portfolio development course has not resulted in a request for credit, Learners have reported that the benefits were worthwhile. Not uncommonly, the greatest benefits are increased self-confidence and a renewed sense of oneself as a learner.

Suitability of Portfolio Assessment

Portfolio assessment may not be the most suitable choice for learners who are requesting credit for highly theoretical courses, such as most university transfer courses or courses with traditional academic content. A far better recommendation for these learners is a challenge or standardized exam.

Portfolio assessment works best with courses that have a base in practice and in which theory is seen as a rationale for practice rather than as an end within itself. Thus portfolios work best for courses in which people "do" rather than "know," in other words, skills acquisition courses. However, it is only during the process of developing a portfolio that a learner usually comes to the realization of what is known, how it came to be known, and what course is equivalent. Therefore, it would be useful for all individuals considering PLA to prepare a portfolio.

Additional Advantage of Portfolio Preparation

The completed portfolio offers the additional advantage of laying the groundwork for a resume or personal dossier. Many of the skills needed to prepare a portfolio are similar to those required to prepare a resume. Many of the elements in a portfolio (especially the documentation) are components of a dossier.

Portfolio-Assisted Assessment

Supplementary examples of achievement aid a portfolio by more fully documenting the learner's claim for credit. Products, performances, simulations, interviews and oral exams, and skill demonstrations are used to assist portfolio assessment.

Products

Often a product assessment is used to supplement the portfolio. This is especially useful in the fine and performing arts. Paintings, pieces of sculpture, musical compositions, films, tapes, manuals, articles, computer programs, etc., may be considered products. Product assessment, when combined with portfolio assessment, provides a more comprehensive demonstration of learning.

> **Mark, aged 40, currently manages a specialty bookstore. In the past six years, he has travelled extensively in Britain and France and has written an historical novel that has been published. Twenty years ago Mark dropped out of university after two years in a teacher education program. Now he wishes to return to university in order to become a high school English teacher. Mark knows he will need to complete a degree in English literature as preparation for studies in secondary education. He thinks he should be able to get credit for some of his work in creative writing as well as in British geography. Mark may qualify for credit for his knowledge in these areas. A portfolio, accompanied by his published book, would be an excellent way to verify his claim of learning.**

One concern about product assessment that has been expressed by some assessors is authenticity. This concern can be addressed by requesting letters of verification from employers, peers, etc., who watched the learner create the work.

The process used to assess products should be based on the following considerations:

1. The learning outcomes and standards need to be set and articulated.
2. A checklist or form for the assessment needs to be prepared in which each of the specific learning outcomes of the course is related to the specific characteristics of the product.
3. PLA candidates need to receive these guidelines so that they know how their products will be evaluated.
4. The assessors need to be trained.
5. The assessment needs to be planned.

Performance Assessment and Simulations

Unlike product assessment, where an outcome is used to evaluate prior learning, performance assessment involves evaluating the process itself, the act of doing. Generally there are two categories: prepared performance and simulated performance.

Prepared performance is generally in performing arts (i.e., theatre, dance, music) or in physical education. Levels of competence are set that are related to technical or physical skills, level of competence, artistry, etc. The assessor then makes a judgment on the basis of the performance.

Simulated performance is a method by which the assessor tries to create a situation that represents the real life learning that the student claims to have. Simulations are, by definition, controlled and must be prepared with great care and with full understanding of what is to be assessed.

Examples of Performance Assessment and Simulations

- Theatre student acting in a community play
- Auto mechanics student repairing part of an engine
- Human services student presenting a case plan
- Aviation student completing a set of assigned manoeuvres in a cockpit simulator

Because it is often not feasible for a faculty member to observe the performance or simulation in real-life environments, consideration should be given to training employers or supervisors to do the assessments.

For further information on the setting up of performance assessments, refer to the chapter on "Performance Assessment" in *Expert Assessment of Experiential Learning—A CAEL Handbook*, edited by Richard Reilly.

Interviews and Oral Exams

An interview or an *oral* exam often supplements a portfolio. There are three ways in which interviews can be used to assess prior learning. The first, the oral exam, is designed to assess skills and knowledge directly. The second, usually a less-structured interview, is designed to supplement other forms of assessment. The third type of interview is usually used to verify documentation that has been provided in the portfolio.

Although interviews for counselling or for academic advising are often part of the PLA system, this type of interview is different from an interview for assessment.

Oral exams are used by professional bodies in fields such as medicine and substance abuse counselling to determine whether or not a person should be certified or licensed. They are also used in fields such as counselling to determine interpersonal competence. For oral exams to be reliable and valid, it is essential that there be a structured interview situation as well as a structured way to observe and evaluate information according to predetermined criteria.

Skills Demonstrations

When a learner needs to demonstrate the skillful use of equipment, the portfolio alone is usually insufficient documentation. Actual demonstrations of firefighting equipment, heavy duty machinery, laboratory equipment, or carpentry tools, for example, give the assessor an immediate, in-person view of the PLA candidate's competence.

As with all of the other assessment methods, the assessor must establish in advance what is being assessed and what the acceptable performance standards are.

Section 5

Issues in Prior Learning Assessment

Whenever institutional personnel begin to seriously explore the possibility of implementing a PLA process in their institution, questions immediately begin to surface. These are legitimate questions, ones that must be addressed in order to proceed. The experience of other, well-established and well-respected PLA programs can offer some possible answers. Ultimately, of course, the decisions about academic and administrative issues will be made by each institution.

Comments on the following issues are based on the BCCAT Prior Learning Assessment Standards and Implementation Guidelines, which were presented in Section 2.

Academic Issues

Determining Level of Postsecondary Achievement

To be eligible for credit toward a postsecondary credential, prior learning must be consistent with postsecondary achievement levels. Some points to consider when determining the level:

Is the learning authentic and verifiable? The learning that the student presents must be open to inspection. The learner must be able to state what it is that has been learned and how it has been learned and must be able to provide documentation that the learning has been or is being used.

Is the learning applicable outside the context in which it was learned? What is being looked at is the transferability of knowledge and skills. Learners need to indicate and demonstrate how they have used the knowledge and skills that they have acquired in other situations.

Does the learning go above and beyond ordinary life experience? PLA is not a system that grants credit for ordinary life experience. There has to be some learning that is over and above that which is required for survival.

Is the learning recent and/or current? There is a difference between these terms. Currentness can be maintained even though learning is not recent. PLA recognizes skills and knowledge that the individual has acquired and that are being currently used. The relative importance of recent or current learning will depend on the subject area. For example, a literature course may not require that the learning be recently acquired as long as the PLA candidate still has the knowledge. For other subjects, knowledge and skills become dated quite quickly. This could be the case with a course in computer programming taken some time ago.

Is the learning related to a recognized field of study? While there is much learning that may be of interest to adults and may indeed be at a postsecondary level, it may not be part of a recognized field of study and would not be eligible for PLA.

Does the learning have both applied and theoretical components? Learners must be able to articulate the "what" and the "why" of their learning.

Tony is the father of 19-year-old twin girls and a 14-year-old boy. When he read in the newspaper that the local college was offering prior learning assessment, he wondered if he could be granted credit toward a child care worker program for an adolescent psychology course. Tony's experience as a parent does not make him eligible for academic credit because it does not go beyond what is ordinarily found. However, if Tony can demonstrate that his extensive reading, his volunteer experience at a teen centre, his leadership of parenting groups for parents of troubled youth, etc,. is authentic, verifiable, applicable in other situations, beyond ordinary life experiences, recent or current, related to a recognized program of study, and balanced with theory and practical dimensions, Tony has a postsecondary level of achievement. Having determined the level of his learning, Tony can now research whether or not the content of his learning matches the content of the adolescent psychology course.

Reliability and Validity of Assessment

Assessment needs to be valid, reliable, and predictive.

If the assessment measures the learning that it says it is measuring, it is valid. If the assessment receives the same judgment from more than one assessor with repeated students in similar situations, it is reliable. The assessment is predictive when the learner successfully completes the next course for which the assessed course is a prerequisite. (Lack of success in a subsequent course, however, may be due to external factors.)

Ensuring that assessments are valid, reliable, and predictive is largely dependent upon the training of assessors and on the assessor's ability to remain objective.

Objectivity in Assessment

To an assessor, the challenge to maintain objectivity in prior learning assessment is probably similar to the challenge to maintain objectivity in traditional classroom-based assessment. There may be an initial difference, however, until faculty have had more experience with PLA.

Some factors that can interfere with objectivity include:

- Similarity or dissimilarity between assessor and the PLA candidate
- A reluctance to make a judgment one way or another that leads to a "central tendency" of rating
- The style of presentation of autobiographical data
- Cross-cultural values and written communication styles
- Vague or ambiguous standards of achievement
- Unfamiliarity with the PLA process

Assessor training workshops usually address the issue of objectivity and present suggestions for providing objective, reliable assessment.

Language Skills

The BCCAT implementation guidelines recommend that PLA courses and assessment services be offered only in the language of instruction of the institution granting the credit. Because several of the assessment methods require writing, PLA programs will need to identify what is meant by postsecondary-level writing skills. This definition may differ depending upon the discipline.

Completeness of Learning

The issue of completeness of learning cannot be overlooked. Just as students in conventional courses are not required to have 100 percent mastery of course content, the learner who presents a PLA request should not be expected to achieve 100 percent mastery. Students in conventional courses can and do pass courses with only partial mastery of course content and it is reasonable to have the same expectations of PLA candidates.

There must, however, be a minimum level of acceptable achievement. Many competency-based courses require a minimum achievement of seventy percent before the learner can progress to the next level. The mark of "C" or a range of fifty to seventy percent may mean mastery of content or skills. If the passing level is considered to be seventy percent of the content, then the individual must achieve seventy percent and not less.

If a particular skill or knowledge is considered critical, then the individual must demonstrate mastery of it. Before beginning PLA, each learner should receive a statement of the minimum acceptable standard of achievement for the credit requested. This written statement must clearly outline the requirements for successful completion. Lack of clear expectations can lead to misunderstandings and poor use of learner and assessor time.

Options for Incomplete Learning

When learning is incomplete, when it does not satisfy the minimum level of achievement, the question of what to do arises. Many learners who are requesting PLA credit will have the applied component most firmly in hand. If they have any deficiency, it is most likely to be in the theoretical backup. Institutions may wish to consider some of the following options for incomplete learning as they plan their policies and procedures:

- *Deny credit:* If learning is incomplete, the learner receives no credit.
- *Award partial credit:* Rather than awarding full value, partial credit is granted. For example, instead of granting 3 credits, 1 or 2 credits can be awarded. Partial credit awards may be more useful to learners requesting unassigned credit than for those seeking assigned credit.
- *Award full credit on completion of supplementary learning activities:* If the institution selects this option, then provision needs to be made for it to specify the missing learning and for the learner to obtain it. A tracking system is also necessary. Independent study is one way the learner can "top up" missing knowledge. Learning contracts are another choice.

Prerequisites

Learners who have received PLA credit for a course or program may encounter difficulty in subsequent registrations unless the institution develops a policy on PLA and prerequisites. In keeping with the philosophy that it is "what, rather than how" the learner knows, institutions that support a PLA process will most likely treat students with PLA credit for prerequisites in the same way as they treat students who enrol with formally acquired prerequisites. For example, current registration policies and procedures may prevent a learner with PLA credit for an introductory course in human geography from registering in a subsequent urban geography course that has a human geography prerequisite.

Residency Requirement

Most institutions in British Columbia have residency requirements. One of the questions that needs to be answered is whether or not PLA will be able to count toward these residency requirements. Another issue is the percentage of the credential that can be completed through PLA.

Residency Requirements for a Postsecondary Credential

Some institutions require that a percentage of credits required for a diploma or degree be taken in formal courses at the institution. Others argue that such a policy is more institution focussed than learner focussed and that if the method of assessment is valid and reliable, there should be no limit placed on the number of PLA credits that can be applied.

Source: Morin. *Prior Learning Assessment: A Discussion Paper*

Candidacy for PLA

Some institutions may want to make candidacy to the PLA process broadly available; others will choose to limit access to the process to students who have been admitted into a program at the institution. For many adults, exactly how much of their prior learning will be recognized is critical to their decision to undertake further education. Some will need to know the results of their request for PLA credit *before* they apply to a specific program.

Assessments Done by Experts

One of the standards adopted by the BCCAT is that prior learning should only be assessed by experts in the field. Institutions committed to a strong PLA program, however, may choose to recruit and train faculty who are not only content specialists but who are, or who become, specialists in assessment.

Administrative Issues

Transcription

In the BCCAT standards on PLA, there are two administrative standards that pertain to transcription. These standards are valuable planning tools for postsecondary institutions as they set policies for PLA programs.

Most, if not all, institutions already have policies and procedures for transcripting the credits awarded to a learner for challenge exams, for course equivalency, and for program equivalency (i.e., block credit). New policies and procedures will be necessary for transcripting the credits awarded to a learner for standardized exams, for portfolio assessment, and for portfolio-assisted assessment.

Transcription

From the PLA Standards adopted by BCCAT:

Standard #6: Credits that are awarded as a result of PLA should be identified as such on the transcript issued by the institution.

Standard #7: Credit awards and the transcript entries should be monitored to avoid giving PLA credits and other credits for the same learning.

Grading

Opinion is divided on whether PLA requests should be graded using a letter system or graded using a mastery/non-mastery system. Having a letter grade will probably facilitate transferability. It also allows for the inclusion of PLA credits in the calculation of grade point average and lessens any possible stigma attached to PLA.

With grading systems for portfolio assessment, the assessor must take care to grade the learning and not the portfolio (i.e., not the learner's writing and organizational abilities). Because portfolios generally provide only indirect examples of learning, this becomes especially important. If a letter grade system is used, then the standards for assigning a letter grade need to be made very clear and preferably should be criterion-referenced.

Articulation of PLA Credits

As in all matters related to transferability and articulation, PLA transfer credit will be addressed by institutions, articulation committees, and BCCAT.

Institutions are encouraged to accept transfer of PLA credits, especially when the PLA process has adhered to recognized guidelines.

Type of Credits Awarded

The types of credit awarded for PLA will be determined within each institution. A review of PLA programs of postsecondary institutions in the United States and Ontario reveals that several systems are used to award credit. Some institutions only award credit on a "course analog" model. This model is useful when the PLA candidate's learning outcomes match a given course outline fairly well. However, adult learning does not always match this well since adults tend to learn what is relevant to their lives rather on a course-outcome basis. To accommodate this form of learning, some

institutions award credit for "general education" or for "electives." This model is useful for programs that have general education requirements and for programs that include opportunities for electives. British Columbia institutions will need to decide if one or more than one approach will be used to award PLA credit within their institutions.

An examination of the way in which transfer credit is presently categorized demonstrates that PLA credit could be similarly categorized.

The BC postsecondary system has a long history of transfer credit agreements. The BCCAT *BC Transfer Guide*, published annually, lists transfer credit arrangements that have been officially articulated between accredited postsecondary institutions within British Columbia. In this document, transfer credit is classified into four categories. Although this model for classifying credit (see following box) is designed for transfer credit, the model is equally useful for classifying credit awarded by PLA.

For example, a learner may have knowledge and skills in the field of anthropology. Using the categories listed below, institutions could decide to award PLA credit in one of four ways. If the evidence of learning matched the learning outcomes of a specific course, the institution would award assigned credit, that is, Type (i) credit. If the evidence of learning did not match a specific course but met the criteria for postsecondary level learning, unassigned (elective) credit could be awarded. Depending on the nature of the learning, the unassigned credit could be Type (ii), Type (iii), or Type (iv).

Categories of Transfer Credit

Type (i): **Specific equivalent of a given course (assigned credit)**
Example: ANTH 111 (3 credits)

Type (ii): **Unassigned (elective) credit in a discipline or department**
Example: ANTH (3 credits) or ANTH 100 –level (3 credits)

Type (iii): **Unassigned (elective) credit in a faculty or program**
Example: GE Arts (3 credits)

Type (iv): **Unassigned (elective) credit for courses not identifiable with course offerings but that are evaluated as being appropriate for academic credit on transfer**
Example: GE Arts (3 credits)

Source: BCCAT, ***British Columbia Transfer Guide: 1994-1995***

Assessment Fees

Currently each institution in British Columbia has policies on how learners are charged for challenge exams. The fees range from fifty percent to one hundred percent of the regular tuition for a course.

Fees for other assessment methods (e.g., portfolio assessment) will vary, depending on institutional policies.

When assessment fee structures are being established, there is one overriding consideration. *The amount charged for prior learning assessment must not be dependent upon the number of credits that are awarded.* This is essential if institutions do not want to be seen as "selling credit." Educational institutions do not sell credit: they evaluate learning.

Recognition for Assessors

Faculty who assess prior learning will need to be compensated for their time. The amount of time needed depends on how experienced the assessor is and what methods are being used for assessment. Experienced assessors take less time to assess a particular learner.

Proctoring and grading a challenge exam may only take a few hours as would reading and evaluating a portfolio. A portfolio that reveals learning gaps, however, will require additional time for assessment, mainly to enable the assessor to design, monitor, and evaluate the learner's subsequent learning contract.

Until such time as the number of PLA candidates is significant in a given area, payment to faculty is likely to be in the nature of an honorarium. Institutions will need to design payment schemes that match their needs.

Workload

The issue of compensation and recognition for faculty is critical to the success of PLA. Unless the assessment of prior learning is addressed formally by the institution, PLA will remain on the fringes of the academic institution. Faculty may be concerned that their involvement in PLA may lessen the need for them in the classroom. As well, they may be reluctant to get involved if they see this as one more activity that they are expected to do but that is not recognized formally by the institution.

Individual versus Committee Assessment

It is not clear at this time whether assessment is best conducted on an individual or committee basis. Institutions have tried both. Assessment by an individual content specialist is very common. In committee assessment, assessment is done by a committee comprised of faculty and outside experts if required.

In some programs and departments, faculty may be more comfortable assessing prior learning with the help of colleagues, especially in courses or modules that they do not normally teach. As well, assessment committees might be formed to make use

of outside practitioners or alumni who are familiar with the institution, the field, and the program, and whose expertise in the field can assist the department in making a decision.

In all cases, the final assessment decision is recorded along with the name, qualifications, and signature of the assessor(s).

Training for PLA Personnel

In order for a prior learning assessment program to work, all personnel who agree to get involved will need training. The type and content of training will vary, depending on the role of the PLA participant in the PLA process.

Training for assessors, for example, might emphasize a theoretical perspective on adult learning (note Appendix A, on Characteristics of Adult Learners), provincial principles and practices, an orientation to methods of assessment, ethical issues in PLA, strategies for designing supplemental evaluation, etc. Training for student services personnel could include similar topics but might emphasize career and educational planning for the PLA candidate.

Initially it may be necessary to include "outside experts" with extensive PLA experience to serve as trainers. Local trainers who are familiar with the design and delivery of education within British Columbia should be used as trainers wherever possible. As well, training needs to be "hands-on." Sample portfolios should be given to faculty to evaluate as a way of gaining practical experience in assessing portfolios for breadth, depth, and completeness. Training needs to be system wide and be seen as vital if PLA is to succeed. If training is not provided, PLA will not achieve recognition as a valued educational assessment approach.

Advanced Placement

The phrase *advanced placement* refers to a learner's direct entry into a higher level of a course or program. With advanced placement, the learner who needs a sequence of courses is allowed, on the basis of prior learning, to enter the sequence at a higher level.

Whether or not the learner receives credit for the first part of the sequence is decided by the program or institution. There is much variability within British Columbia on this issue. Some institutions simply allow the learner to skip the prerequisite course. Other institutions allow the learner both to skip the prerequisite and to receive credit for the prerequisite as if the learner had completed it.

The Advanced Placement Program (APP) is a program of the Educational Testing Service. Offered in some British Columbia high schools, APP courses are an example of the concept of advanced placement. Successful completion of APP courses can lead to credit and/or advanced standing for some introductory university-level courses.

Frequency of Assessment

Where challenge exams and standardized exams are being used to evaluate prior learning, learners should know, in advance, when these are scheduled. These should be regularly scheduled events, depending on demand.

For portfolio assessment, the timelag between the learner's completion and submission of the portfolio and the assessor's response to the request for credit should be minimal. A month should be ample time for the assessor to complete at least an initial review.

Recordkeeping and Follow-up Evaluation

Institutions will need to develop a recordkeeping system that tracks the progress of PLA requests. An effective system will note the number and type of PLA enquiries and will maintain data on attempted and completed requests. The system should also include data collection which would contribute to a quantitative evaluation of the PLA process within the institution.

Special Issues in Portfolio Assessment

The individualized format of the portfolio and of portfolio-assisted assessment introduces some special issues.

Learning Outcomes

The learner's description of learning should be the core of the portfolio. This learning is expressed in terms of learning outcomes.

Learners may need help in matching their learning to the learning outcomes of a particular course. For some, this will be difficult. Very often learning outcomes for a course are not phrased in behavioral terms or in terms of outcomes. Rather, they are phrased in terms of content or input. Until the time when all course outlines are written according to a standard, the assessor will need to make the necessary adjustments, and institutions should provide assistance to learners to match their personal learning outcomes to course outcomes.

Course outlines that stress mastery of a body of knowledge or a particular way of viewing the world will need to be more specific about what they expect students to know. When course outlines do not use learning outcomes, it would be helpful if the assessor of the course under consideration were to provide the PLA candidate with a checklist or description of what learning is expected of individuals taking the formal course.

Learning Outcomes

Acceptable learning outcomes should:

- **Be stated in terms of learning rather than experience.**
- **Contain an appropriate degree of specificity.**
- **Describe learning that is transferable outside of the context in which it occurred.**

Learners need to demonstrate that they have:

- **Interacted with the knowledge and skills.**
- **Gained an understanding.**
- **Been able to critique their learning.**
- **Applied their learning to a variety of settings.**

Source: Central Region Prior Learning Assessment Pilot Project Team.
A Practitioner's Manual for the Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning

Documentation

The purpose of documentation in a portfolio is to give evidence that learning has taken place. When documentation is incomplete, insufficiently strong, or in doubt, the assessor should consider alternative assessment methods rather than deny the request. Verification of documentation is the responsibility of the assessor.

Evidence of learning can be direct or indirect. Reports that have been written by the learner, photographs that have been taken by the learner, books that have been written by the learner are examples of direct evidence. Indirect evidence is *about* the learner. Examples of indirect evidence include performance appraisals from employers, certificates of achievement, transcripts, press releases, reviews, etc.

Learners may have difficulty in providing documentation for many reasons. The documentation may have been lost or no longer be available. Documentation of attendance is easier to obtain than documentation of learning. Many training experiences remain undocumented. Records are incomplete, memories are weak, etc. The assessor should remain flexible and remember not to require more of the PLA learner than would be required of a classroom learner.

A cautionary note is in order. Many individuals will provide letters from employers and others that essentially are testimonial evidence. That is, they verify the experience rather than the learning. To assist the learner, some institutions have developed a sample letter that learners can use to show employers how to write a documentation letter. Such sample letters are often provided in portfolio development courses.

Documentation

When reviewing evidence of learning in a portfolio, consider:

- **Directness of the evidence**
- **Authenticity**
- **Breadth**
- **Quality**

Source: Central Region Prior Learning Assessment Pilot Project Team.
A Practitioner's Manual for the Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning

Writing Skills

In BC, preparing a portfolio requires postsecondary-level writing skills in either English or French. Yet many of the people who are seeking prior learning assessment may have had their training/education in another language. The skillful assessor will recognize the possibility of falling prey to the "halo effect" when evaluating a portfolio and will avoid being more generous to a portfolio that is well written and well presented than to one that indicates more difficulty with written expression.

Gaps in Learning

Through the process of portfolio assessment, gaps in learning may become evident. Institutions with PLA programs have handled these gaps in learning in three different ways.

1. Credit is awarded for the course if the portfolio is reasonably complete, indicates achievement of all the major learning outcomes, has appropriate depth, breadth, and directness of evidence, is verifiable, etc. If the assessor is satisfied that the learning indicates competency (but not necessarily excellence) in the course, the individual receives credit.

2. Assessors indicate that they have significant reservations about the learning that the PLA candidate has presented. These reservations could include real concerns about the authenticity, breadth, depth, etc., of the documentation, or about the learner's inability to relate learning to specific course outcomes, etc. In the judgment of the assessor, the learner has not presented sufficient evidence to indicate that the learning is at the level normally expected of a formally enrolled student. Course credit would not be recommended. In these cases where credit is not awarded, it is necessary to be very specific about the reasons why credit is denied.

3. In some cases, the candidate has most, if not all, of the learning but there are some gaps in either the evidence or in the scope of the learning. If there are gaps in the evidence, the remedy is to set some additional assessment or request additional evidence. If there are gaps in the scope of the learning, a learning contract is a likely remedy. Credit will be awarded when the deficiencies are rectified.

Student Expectations

Most PLA candidates who enter a PLA process discover that they receive fewer credits than they expect to get. This is especially true in institutions where credits from portfolio assessment are awarded only when the learning matches specific courses, not other program requirements, and not just where there is evidence of generalized knowledge.

Applicants to degree programs may be more successful in getting a greater amount of credit than those who are in certificate or diploma programs. It is more likely that they will be able to get elective credit rather than credits for required courses.

Applicants to programs with extensive practicum requirements may be more successful in using PLA than applicants to more theoretical programs.

The time required to compile a portfolio is frequently underestimated. Learners may encounter periods of frustration and discouragement when the development of the portfolio is taking far longer than anticipated.

Section 6

Participants in the PLA Process

Faculty

To be a faculty assessor requires specific abilities. Not only must the assessor be an expert in the field being assessed, the assessor must have assessment expertise. Beyond that, successful faculty assessors are individuals who are:

- Expert in the subject matter being assessed
- Currently teaching the subject area being assessed
- Trained in assessment, PLA, and the facilitation of learning
- Excellent communicators
- Credible among their colleagues
- Supportive of PLA
- Respectful of the nontraditional learner
- Imaginative and have the time to devote to PLA
- Experienced with adult learners and theories of adult learning
- Lifelong learners
- Skillful curriculum developers
- Able to make judgments free of prejudice/bias for or against persons on the basis of personality, beliefs, race, gender, etc.

Individuals who are chosen to assess PLA should have credibility within their institution, be confident, be capable of making good judgments, be flexible and team-centred, be objective, and be willing to abandon any preconceived notions about what kinds of people can learn what kinds of things.

Skills that faculty assessors should have include: counselling skills, time management skills (meeting deadlines is important), analytical skills, evaluation skills, good interpersonal skills, good writing skills, and cross-cultural and gender-relations skills.

Content specialists need to be able to identify and describe learning outcomes in a particular course. As well, they must be able to conduct portfolio-assisted assessments and provide support for learning contracts. If challenge exams are required, they must design, deliver, and evaluate exams. Finally, they need to feel confident making a decision on whether or not to award credit. If they are in an institution that awards a grade for prior learning, they need to feel comfortable assigning a grade to a student who has not been in a classroom.

Learners

The PLA candidate will normally be an individual with a variety of work and life experiences. Perhaps the learner is re-entering the postsecondary setting; perhaps the learner is a currently enrolled student. Whatever the circumstances motivating the PLA request, to be successful with the PLA process, learners should be able to reflect on their past experiences and be able to extract the learning that they have acquired. The learning for which they are requesting credit must fit into the context of a personal educational plan. Therefore it is wise for learners to critically review their personal life goals.

For most PLA methods, candidates must be able to write at a postsecondary level.

Organizational skills and patience, persistence, and the ability to tolerate ambiguity will assist learners with the PLA process, especially when it is not progressing as rapidly as hoped.

Preparing a portfolio, in particular, is a challenging and time-consuming process. Learners need to be aware of this. Often learners do not complete a portfolio when they become aware of the amount of work that is involved. They need to be counselled from the outset that PLA is not an easy way to get credit. In fact, it is a very rigorous form of learning assessment.

Outside Content Specialists

Outside content specialists may need to be used for the assessment of learning where there is no faculty person available to do so. Certifying bodies have a role in the assessment of prior learning. Often they are the ones who will be setting standards for the profession and who are best able to describe the competencies needed for a particular area of endeavor. As well, they may be able to provide the external expertise necessary to evaluate a particular piece of learning.

Student Services Personnel

Advisors and counsellors have a key role to play in PLA. With PLA occurring in the context of an individual's career planning or educational or life planning, learners are encouraged to take advantage of career planning opportunities and academic advice available from counsellors and advisors. The student services office is often the first place that prospective students go to for information about educational programs, so personnel should be included in PLA training in order to be well informed about the PLA process.

Departments and Programs

Heads of departments and programs may need to make adjustments in their course outlines in order to facilitate PLA. In order for learners to match their learning to a given course, course objectives must be specific and must be phrased in terms of student learning objectives. Currently the situation in this area is critical. Course outlines use a wide variety of approaches. Some are narrative in nature. Some have content-centred objectives. Some have twenty different objectives. Some have none. It is critical that course outlines follow an agreed-upon standard and that they be written in terms of learner outcomes. Without the course objectives being written in terms of learner outcomes, it will be difficult, if not impossible, for learners to discern their learning. The role of articulation committees is central here. They can be used as means of creating standardized course outcomes, especially when transferability between institutions is a critical issue.

Registrar's Office

Postsecondary institutions need to have policies and procedures in place that support PLA, including policies and procedures for services provided by the Registrar's Office. This important office needs to be fully involved in decision making and implementation.

Others in the Institution and Community

Many institutional and community personnel can be involved in prior learning assessment. Employers, professional associations, and field mentors are some examples of interested parties who may wish to take an active part in the assessment of prior learning. All should have some orientation to prior learning assessment and be conversant with its aims and philosophies.

PLA Co-ordination

Each institution needs to consider appointing a PLA co-ordinator who can fulfil several roles. Chief among them would be the dissemination of information. This position would also be responsible for overseeing policies and procedures for PLA in that particular institution. The portfolio development course mentioned earlier in this manual, would be co-ordinated through this office. The PLA co-ordinator would facilitate and monitor the evaluation of all portfolio assessments as well as assist in the ongoing development of challenge processes.

Conclusion

This manual has attempted to capture your interest in prior learning assessment by providing a more detailed look at the background and issues involved in implementing a PLA program.

If you are interested in furthering your knowledge of prior learning assessment and becoming part of this activity, here's what you can do:

- Find out about the plans and policies for PLA at your institution.
- Do further reading on the topic by referring to the bibliography.
- Request materials from BCCAT on prior learning assessment.
- Ask to participate in PLA training.
- Promote the idea of prior learning assessment to both potential PLA candidates and faculty colleagues.

Appendixes

Appendix A

Characteristics of Adult Learners

In planning programs for adult learners and in considering the needs of adult learners to have their life and work experience recognized (and thus validated), educators have to be cognizant of the characteristics of adult learners. Research has indicated that the following are characteristic of adult learners:

- Much of what adults learn outside of formal educational settings may be equated to postsecondary-level learning and should be formally recognized as such.
- Adults consider what is learned to be more important than the setting in which it was learned.
- Adults often learn more in informal settings than they do in formal settings.
- Adults acquire knowledge and skills not for their intrinsic worth but for their utility in helping solve current problems.
- Adults have acquired the ability to learn from experiences.
- Individual adults learn similar things in very different ways and settings (i.e., on an individual basis).
- Adults require educators who are responsive to their diverse needs and to the fact that adults come from a wide variety of diverse backgrounds, cultures, and circumstances.
- Adults have other roles, responsibilities, and commitments that compete with education for their time and attention.
- The process of active assessment promotes learning.

Source: Central Region Prior Learning Assessment Pilot Project Team, *A Practitioner's Manual for the Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning*

Appendix B

Sample of Prior Learning Assessment Policy in British Columbia

as used by the University College of the Fraser Valley

Because a new degree in Adult Education has a significant prior learning component, UCFV has instituted a PLA policy. As the policy, as described below, has yet to be implemented, it has not yet been tested. Douglas College also has a PLA policy, and many, if not most, institutions in British Columbia also have well-established challenge policies, which are, of course, a form of PLA.

Policy

UCFV recognizes that adult learners acquire knowledge and skills through life and work experience. Through prior learning assessment, UCFV will assess students' knowledge and skills and will grant credits for the learning that took place.

Guidelines[1]:

Applicants requesting PLA must be admitted to a certificate, diploma, or degree program before PLA will proceed.

All learners considering PLA will participate in a course designed to prepare them for the prior learning assessment.

The learner has the primary responsibility for preparing the evidence that college-creditable learning has taken place and that it contributes to an appropriate balance of theory and practical application.

UCFV will award credit only for prior learning which is documented in a portfolio and which is at college level. This process challenges learners to claim and articulate their knowledge, skills, abilities, and values based on documentation that describes learning or provides evidence of learning on a course-by-course basis.

The portfolio should demonstrate to the assessor that the learner meets the course objectives or learning outcomes of the particular course for which she/he is seeking credit.

The portfolio will include:

- A chronological record detailing significant activities including work experience, volunteer experience, and nonformal learning.
- A paper detailing educational and career goals.
- A description of competencies, knowledge, and skills.

[1] All of these are based on the BCCAT standards.

- Documentation materials such as job descriptions, performance appraisals, transcripts, samples of work, testimonials, certificates of attendance, previous credentials and awards.
- A narrative that will convey to the assessor that the learner has the knowledge applicable to the course description under assessment.
- Other materials that document evidence of the learner's knowledge of the assessed subject area.

Challenge examinations rather than portfolio assessment are most appropriate to determine credit for courses that are highly theoretical. However, students should prepare a portfolio so that their prior learning may be evaluated against the course requirements. If the Faculty assessor agrees that there is some similarity, then the student would be encouraged to request a challenge examination. Learners who receive an unfavorable decision from the faculty assessor will have access to UCFV's appeal process.

Prior learning will be assessed only by faculty who have expertise in the area to be assessed.

The faculty assessor will be responsible for ensuring that the documentation provided by the learner supports the claim for credit. If the assessor believes that the knowledge the learner has demonstrated is sufficient and appropriate for each course the learner has specified, the recommendation will be that credit be awarded.

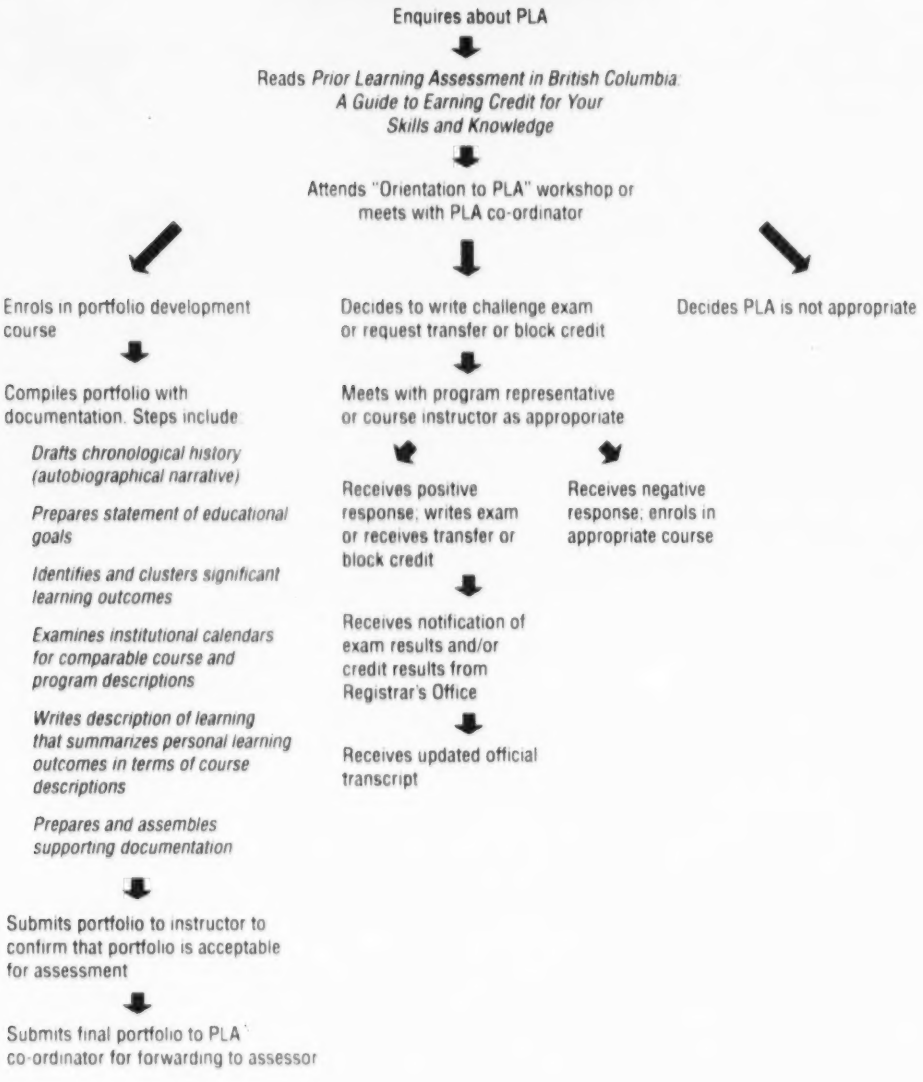
The courses for which credit is given will use the same grading scheme as similar courses taught on a scheduled basis.

UCFV will award credit for prior learning which is directly applicable to the UCFV program to which the student has been admitted. Credit awarded will not necessarily be transferred to other degree programs or institutions.

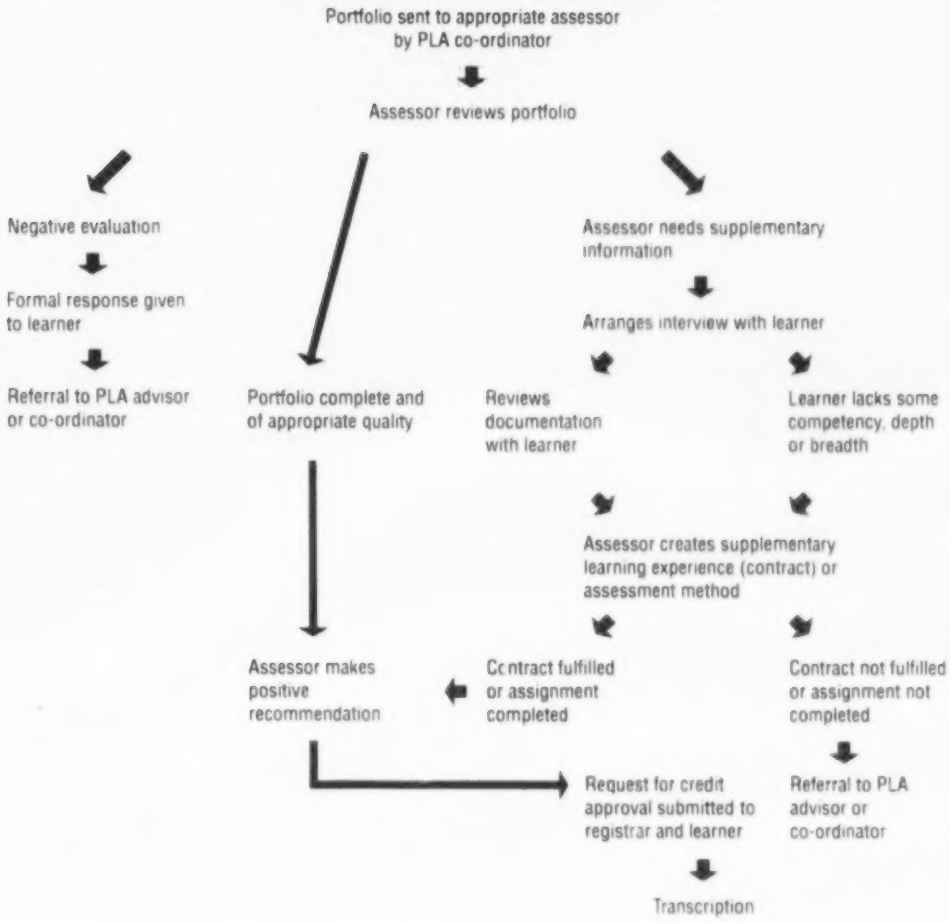
The student's transcript will show that credit has been earned through PLA.

Normally no more than twenty-five percent of the credits required in a program will be awarded for prior learning.

Appendix C
Suggested PLA Process for Learner


Enquires about PLA
Reads *Prior Learning Assessment in British Columbia: A Guide to Earning Credit for Your Skills and Knowledge*
Attends "Orientation to PLA" workshop or meets with PLA co-ordinator
Enrols in portfolio development course
Compiles portfolio with documentation. Steps include:
Drafts chronological history (autobiographical narrative)
Prepares statement of educational goals
Identifies and clusters significant learning outcomes
Examines institutional calendars for comparable course and program descriptions
Writes description of learning that summarizes personal learning outcomes in terms of course descriptions
Prepares and assembles supporting documentation
Submits portfolio to instructor to confirm that portfolio is acceptable for assessment
Submits final portfolio to PLA co-ordinator for forwarding to assessor
Decides to write challenge exam or request transfer or block credit
Meets with program representative or course instructor as appropriate
Receives positive response; writes exam or receives transfer or block credit
Receives notification of exam results and/or credit results from Registrar's Office
Receives updated official transcript
Receives negative response; enrols in appropriate course
Decides PLA is not appropriate

Appendix D
Process of Administering Portfolio Evaluation


Portfolio sent to appropriate assessor by PLA co-ordinator
Assessor reviews portfolio
Negative evaluation
Formal response given to learner
Referral to PLA advisor or co-ordinator
Portfolio complete and of appropriate quality
Assessor needs supplementary information
Arranges interview with learner
Reviews documentation with learner
Learner lacks some competency, depth or breadth
Assessor creates supplementary learning experience (contract) or assessment method
Assessor makes positive recommendation
Contract fulfilled or assignment completed
Contract not fulfilled or assignment not completed
Request for credit approval submitted to registrar and learner
Referral to PLA advisor or co-ordinator
Transcription

Glossary

Adult learner: Usually, this term is used to describe learners who are over eighteen years old.

Advanced placement: Direct entry into a higher level of a course or program, possible because of recognition of a student's background.

Application: A form completed by the prospective student. The application form provides some personal information but more importantly indicates the course or program that the student wants to enter. There is usually a nominal application fee. Any documents that verify that the student meets the entrance requirements are usually attached to the application form.

Articulation: The system used by postsecondary institutions to determine which courses are equivalent to one another. For example, UBC and UCFV have agreed that UBC's Math 100 course is equivalent to UCFV's Math 111 course.

Assessment: The process of reviewing, measuring, and evaluating evidence of the student's learning to determine whether credit should be awarded.

Assessor: The specialist who is responsible for assessing student learning. In most cases, the assessor is a faculty member who has specialized knowledge in the subject area. Occasionally, a second specialist (perhaps a member of a professional organization) is asked to review the student's work.

CAEL: Acronym for Council for Adult and Experiential Learning. This United States–based organization has been influential in creating opportunities for adults to gain recognition for their learning gained from experience.

Challenge exam: A test prepared by a course instructor to measure a student's knowledge of course content; this type of exam is used for students who have not attended the course.

Continuing education: Usually courses offered on a part-time, noncredit basis; although continuing education courses are often offered in the evenings, "night school" is not an accurate definition. Continuing education can include general-interest courses as well as employment-related courses.

Course: A formal, organized learning experience, usually taught by an instructor from a prepared outline of content and learning outcomes.

Credential: The document acknowledging completion of a particular program or course of study.

Credit(s): The value assigned to a formal course. Most courses are worth 3 or 4 credits, which means the student is in class for three or four hours per week for fourteen or fifteen weeks. Students enrolled in credit courses are required to demonstrate their achievement; grades are usually assigned. Some institutions use the phrase "semester hours" or "hours of credit" instead of "credits."

Currentness: The extent to which learning is valid at the time of assessment or application. In some fields, such as computer technology, currentness is particularly important in determining whether or not to award credit for prior learning.

Distance learning: Learning that is delivered by electronic, print, or other media, away from the institution where the curriculum was developed or the instruction originated.

Documentation: The evidence that is submitted to prove the student's claim of learning. Documentation can be direct (examples of a student's work) or indirect (letters of reference, certificates of achievement).

Electives: Courses that do not constitute core requirements of the program but are relevant to the program and enrich a student's learning. Although all programs have specific course requirements, some programs allow students to include courses of their choosing.

Entrance requirements: The set of requirements that a student must complete in order to be admitted to a program. All BC postsecondary institutions have entrance requirements, such as a minimum age of nineteen or grade 12 graduation. Additional requirements may be expected for admission to a specific program. These requirements vary but can include successful completion of other courses or achievement of a minimum score or grade on a test.

Equivalency: The process of determining the comparability of two or more learnings. In prior learning assessment, equivalencies are most frequently made for comparable courses, for comparable programs, and for comparable learning outcomes.

Evaluation: The process used by the assessor to decide if the student's learning will be granted credit.

Exemption: A waiver of a requirement. A student may be excused from completing a course or program requirement if approval is granted by the appropriate institutional representative. Usually exemptions are only granted to students who have proven that they have comparable learning. Although an exemption may be granted, the student may be required to replace the exempted course with an alternate.

Formal learning: Learning that has occurred through taking a structured credit course.

Full-time student: Definitions may vary among institutions. A student who enrols in a minimum of three courses each semester (or at least 60 percent of the program requirements) is usually classified as full-time. Some programs are only available to full-time students who are enrolled on a 100-percent basis.

Graduation requirements: The set of requirements that a student must complete in order to graduate from a program. Each program establishes its own requirements. Calendars available from colleges and universities specify the graduation requirements.

Informal learning: See nonformal learning.

Learning objectives: A course outline should be available for each credit course taught at postsecondary institutions. These outlines or an accompanying document should identify the learning objectives for the course. For an introductory accounting course, for example, the learning objectives might include the following:

> At the end of this course students will be able to:
>
> 1. Analyse transactions using accounting and financial terms.
> 2. Post journal entries to the general ledger.
> 3. Use a ten-column worksheet.

Learning outcomes: What you know and what you can do as a result of your learning experiences. If you worked for five years as a supervisor of the word-processing unit in a large corporation, one learning outcome may be "developed successful scheduling procedures." When you apply for credit for your prior learning you will be required to describe your learning outcomes in phrases. When writing a learning outcome use action words such as: classify, co-ordinate, organize, analyse. Your learning outcomes should be matched with the learning objectives for each course.

Major: A collection of twelve to eighteen courses in a single subject area. Students enrolled in a bachelor's degree program usually select a specialization (e.g., English, history, biology, accounting, mathematics).

Minor: Definitions vary with institutions and programs, but this often refers to a collection of seven to twelve courses in a single subject area. Bachelor's degree students are not required to have a minor, but may do a minor as well as a major or may choose to do two minors in lieu of one major.

Noncredit: Courses, modules, etc., that are taken by individuals for their personal or professional benefit; usually do not involve testing or demonstrating mastery. School boards, private training institutions, and governmental and non-governmental organizations as well as postsecondary institutions may offer noncredit courses.

Nonformal learning: Also known as prior learning, informal learning, and experiential learning. Generally refers to skills and knowledge acquired in situations other than formal study.

Part-time student: A student who enrols in only one or two courses each semester is usually classified as part-time. However, part-time student status is defined slightly differently by different institutions. There may be part-time programs that are geared for these students or there may be part-time options in full-time programs.

Portfolio: A file or folder of information that systematically documents an individual's learning experiences and accomplishments.

Postsecondary education: The education that takes place after high school. Colleges, university colleges, universities, and institutes are the primary deliverers of postsecondary education. In some communities, adult education is offered through the school districts.

Postsecondary-level learning: Learning that is equated to the level expected from students registered in a formal course at a postsecondary institution. Such learning will reflect knowledge of concepts, theories, and analysing and synthesizing skills.

Practicum: "Hands-on" learning; students enrolled in a practicum get a chance to apply their classroom learning to a real-life situation. A practicum is usually taken for credit.

Prerequisite: The course(s) that have to be completed in order to gain admission into a subsequent course.

Programs: A set of courses arranged to reflect coherent academic or training objectives. Most programs are described in terms of the number of credits that are assigned to each course. When a student successfully completes a program, a credential is awarded. Credentials available from postsecondary institutions in British Columbia include:

- *Certificate:* Usually represents a minimum of 30 credits (10–15 courses); most of the courses are prescribed and the student has few, if any, electives.
- *Diploma:* Usually represents a minimum of 60 credits (20–24 courses); although most courses are prescribed, the student may have some electives.
- *Associate degree:* Usually represents a minimum of 60 credits (20–24 courses); this degree can be granted only by community colleges or university colleges accredited in BC. Two associate degrees are available: Associate in Arts and Associate in Science.
- *Bachelor's degree:* Usually represents a minimum of 120 credits and has specific course requirements; all courses must be university-level.
- *Master's degree:* Usually represents an additional 30–60 credits after completion of a bachelor's degree.

Registration: The process of enrolling in courses and/or a program. Students are allowed to select courses after they have been notified of their admission and acceptance into a program. Several months may separate the time of application and the time of registration. Registration requires payment of tuition fees.

Semester: A period of time used to divide the school year. In BC, most postsecondary institutions use a semester system. Each semester is fourteen or fifteen consecutive weeks. There may be two or three semesters in a calendar year. A typical semester system is September to December; January to April; May to August.

Standardized tests for PLA (Postsecondary Level)

CLEP:	College Level Examination Program
ACT-PEP:	American College Testing Proficiency Examination Program
DANTES:	Defense Activity for Nontraditional Educational Support
SOCAT:	Student Occupational Competency Achievement Tests
APP:	Advanced Placement Program
GRE:	Graduate Record Examination

Transcript: The document provided by the postsecondary institution that verifies the student's enrolment and achievement in the institution. The transcript records course title and number, date of enrolment, grades, and any credential(s) received. An *official* transcript bears the seal of the institution and an original, official signature.

Transfer credit: The awarding of comparable credit by a postsecondary institution for course or program credit gained at another postsecondary institution.

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